

## **History in West Caln Township – Part 1**

In a series of articles, The West Caln Township Historical Commission is presenting a brief portrayal of history in the Township. The first article is about the Dawson Farm; the Brandywine Valley Association property on South Bonsall School Road, previously owned by George Saalbach. The time frame of this portrayal is during the Revolutionary War period.

Chester County was one of the three original counties created by William Penn in 1682. Caln Township was first designated in 1714 and further divided into East Caln and West Caln in 1728. West Caln Township was officially recognized as such in 1744. An important physical feature of West Caln Township was the Indian Trail that became Old Peter's Road and is now Route 340. In the early 1700's, it was the main road between Philadelphia and Lancaster and was known variously as the King's Highway, the Great Road, the Provincial Road, and the Conestoga Road. A number of inns developed along the road serving as dining facilities, taverns, and shelters for travelers. Those that functioned as taverns were required to be licensed. Many of these structures still exist as do several of the farmhouses from the Revolutionary era, including the Dawson Farm.

The story of this farm's owners represents one of the more intriguing tales of Revolutionary Pennsylvania. The farm was established by Thomas Dawson in 1716. Two generations later, 450 acres were the property of his grandson David. When the Revolution began, David stayed "a true friend of his majesty's government," conducting covert operations – espionage and economic warfare against the Patriot cause. Consequently, he was among 500 Pennsylvanians declared traitors by the Executive Council. In May 1780 a citizen's Committee of Safety apprehended him and sent him to jail in Philadelphia. State Supreme Court Chief Justice Thomas McKean subsequently passed a sentence of death on Dawson "without any form of trial." Several members of Dawson's family petitioned for a commutation of the sentence, as did Dawson himself. They all failed.

On November 25, 1780, Dawson was hanged in the Philadelphia Commons. Only four citizens of the Commonwealth were hanged for treason during the revolution. Three of those four were sentenced to death at trial. Dawson received no such treatment. His execution was unique – the only summary execution under a bill of attainder in the history of the state, and perhaps the first in the history of the country.

This is only the beginning of historic happenings at this farm in our Township. The farm was also known to have helped with the Underground Railroad prior to the Civil War, and was also part of the iron and steel heritage associated with Luken's Steel. It currently serves as an education center for the Brandywine Valley Association.